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ABSTRACT

The proportion of community college students transferring to a four-year institution dropped considerably during the 1970's and early 1980's, a situation leading to accusations that the colleges do not prepare their students sufficiently well for transfer. However, several other factors have an influence on transfer rates. The fact that most community college students attend on a part-time basis accounts for some of the difference in rates of bachelor's degree attainment between community college and four-year college matriculants. The mere fact that community college students must transfer from one institution to another may also account for some of the shortfall. The transfer function is further weakened by institutional policies that support the idea of the college as a passive resource available to all who would drop in at any time during their lifetimes. These policies result in 85% of the matriculants not obtaining a degree, a lateral curriculum in which prerequisites to courses are not enforced, and a system in which student progress towards completion is not monitored. In efforts to increase transfer rates, colleges have begun to monitor student progress, provide information and hold meetings on transfer opportunities, enforce course prerequisites, and offer remedial courses to bring a sizable population up to a basic standard of literacy. Statewide efforts can be seen in California, which set aside $3 million for transfer centers in 20 colleges; New Jersey, which awarded special funds to its colleges to recruit transfer oriented minority students; and Colorado and Michigan, which mandated articulation plans between community colleges and public universities. While these efforts will eventually have some effect, major changes in philosophy and policy must be made if the number of students who transfer to a four-year university is to increase substantially. Statewide policies should be established to: (1) guarantee transfer students acceptance at a university without loss of units; (2) set aside special funds to reward colleges for improved transfer rates; (3) establish a common course numbering system for two- and four-year colleges; and (4) develop a centralized, accessible interinstitutional database. More importantly, community college staff members should identify potential transfers early on and monitor their progress until they complete their studies and enter the university. (VVC)

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Commitment to Transfer

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The community colleges have had a commitment to transfer since their beginnings. One of their initial purposes was to take students from secondary school, provide them with general education and introductory collegiate studies, and send them on to senior institutions for the baccalaureate. An associate degree recipient was presumed to be qualified to enter the junior year at a university. The associate in arts and associate in science have always been viewed as preparatory; the few associate degrees that were not designed for transfer were given titles such as associate in applied science or associate in general studies.

Shifting Priorities

Accusations that the community colleges do not prepare their students sufficiently well for transfer have arisen because the proportion of students entering the colleges with the intention of transferring and the proportion of those who did in fact transfer dropped notably during the 1970s and early 1980s. According to Medsker (1960), two-thirds of the students entering community colleges in the 1950s sought transfer. By the 1980s, that proportion had dropped to one-third. Around one-third of the students actually transferred in the 1960s. Twenty years later that proportion had dropped to under 15 percent.

Patterns of student attendance also reveal shifting priorities. The community colleges enroll 37 percent of all students attending higher education in America and, 48 percent of all the undergraduates. However, 65 percent of the community college students attend part time (Fernandez, 1987) and many already have college degrees. Some college district figures reflect this differentiated pattern of student attendance. Among the Maricopa Community College District's 60,000 students, 7,000 were formerly enrolled in Arizona State University, whereas 8,700 Arizona State University students were formerly enrolled in the Maricopa colleges. Furthermore, although 45 percent of the high-school graduates in the Phoenix metropolitan area enter one of the local community colleges, they account for only 8 percent of the district's full-time equivalent student enrollment (de los Santos, 1989).

Influences on Transfer Rates

There is no question that students enrolling in community colleges are somewhat less likely than four-year college students to attain baccalaureate degrees within four or five years. The part-time attendance pattern certainly accounts for some of the difference between community college matriculants and those entering as freshmen in four-year institutions. Since few community college students reside on campus or have on-campus jobs, they tend to be less involved with their collegiate studies than their four-year college counterparts.

The mere fact that community college matriculants must transfer from one institution to another before obtaining the baccalaureate accounts for some of the shortfall. Many things can happen in the process: students take jobs instead; they find that they cannot readily leave their hometowns to go to the university; it becomes convenient to step out of education for a while and get on with other aspects of their lives.

One of the widely held misconceptions about the reasons fewer students who begin their college careers at community colleges obtain baccalaureate degrees is that the colleges emphasize occupational studies and courses that do not carry transfer credit. However, more students transfer from so-called career programs than from the traditional baccalaureate directive programs. Career education does not undermine transfer from community colleges; rather, the transfer function is weakened by institutional policies that support the idea of the college as a passive resource available to all who would drop in at any time during their lifetimes to take a course in whatever interests them at time. These policies result in a lateral curriculum, one in which prerequisites to courses are not enforced and in which student progress toward program completion is not monitored.

The effects of such policies are revealed not only in the low rate of program completion, but also in the high rate of student satisfaction. Although 85 percent of community college students do not obtain degrees, a similar proportion say that the college provided them with what they were looking for: courses for personal interest, access to the job market, or studies basic to their becoming functionally literate. While the organization and funding of community college instructional programs presuppose that students are taking courses in order to complete an entire program, students are quite satisfied with education short of the degree.

Efforts to Bolster the Transfer Function

Many community colleges have attempted to increase their transfer rates by monitoring student progress, providing information on transfer opportunities, enforcing course prerequisites, holding special group meetings for prospective transfers, and similar interventions. Remedial studies have become so prominent recently that they now account for as much as one-third of the instructional budget, and represent the third major function of the community colleges, behind only academic and occupational studies. The colleges provide basic literacy studies for sizable proportions of their students, including non-native English speakers, as well as those leaving high school without the ability to read or write. Some of the most innovated instruction is done in the remedial area.

Testing students at entry and again at the sophomore level has become prominent and boasts to have an effect on the transfer figures. Colleges in several states are either required or urged to test students at entry and place them in programs in which they have a chance of success. That alone would account for much of the increase in remedial work. Florida has had such a program for several years, and more recently a requirement for basic skills assessment has been introduced into Texas. Rather than mandating testing states such as California award additional monies to colleges that impose matriculation tests and seek to augment their transfer-directed activities.

Statewide Efforts

These special funds for transfer have become prominent. In 1987, eleven states were making special monies available to colleges to enhance transfer-directed activities. California set aside $3 million for transfer centers in 20 colleges. Colorado and Michigan mandated articulation plans between community colleges and public universities. New Jersey awarded special funds to its colleges to recruit transfer-oriented minority students. Ohio awarded funds for colleges that would promote such activities (Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1987). Illinois had numerous special programs to enhance minority student progress through the community colleges. These included recruiting and counseling high school students, providing basic skills activities for adults, and connecting the community colleges with elementary schools and intramural support groups (Illinois Community College Board, 1989).

These types of transfer-directed activities have been summarized in many works including those by Donovan and others (1987) and Richardson and Bender (1987). Most of the interventions are well intentioned and will eventually have some effect. However, some major changes must be made if the community colleges are to come anywhere near parity in the proportion of their entering students who go on to receive the baccalaureate. There should be statewide agreements to the effect that any student who completes an associate degree program is guaranteed admission to the university with no loss of credit. There should be special funds set aside for community colleges that increase their percentage of transfers. Every state should have a centralized student data base so that interinstitutional progress can be monitored. And there should be common course numbering systems so that each student's transcript does not have to be reviewed separately.

Conclusion

Probably the most important single statement that can be made regarding student transfer is that the community college staff members must identify the potential transfers early on and monitor their progress through the colleges, making frequent direct contact with them until they complete their studies and enter the universities. This takes a form of dedication to student achievement that stands in contradistinction to the prevalent laissez-faire approach to student attendance. The colleges cannot sit by and allow students to take a random walk through the curriculum and at the same time expedite student progress toward the baccalaureate.

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